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FOR H/RGF AND NEA/ELA

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TAGS: PREL PGOV JO

SUBJECT: KING ABDULLAH OUTLINES A REGION IN TRANSITION WITH CODEL DORGAN

Classified By: Ambassador R. Stephen Beecroft for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: King Abdullah, in a December 14 meeting with CODEL Dorgan, discussed the importance of keeping the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations at the center of U.S. Middle East policy during the transition and the next administration. The King also outlined for Senators Dorgan, Conrad, Cochran, and Whitehouse the challenges throughout the region with elections scheduled for 2009 in Israel, the Palestinian territories, Lebanon, Iraq, and Iran. Turning to Iraq, the King stated that he believes Prime Minister Maliki has shown signs of progress. Despite his optimism, the King also stressed that other countries in the region must do their part to build on the improved situation in Iraq. He also expressed concern over tensions between the Maliki government and the Kurds. He likened Iran to "an octopus with tentacles" that was working to undermine stability and spread its influence in the region, primarily through Hizballah and Hamas. Syria, he believed, could be brought into the moderate Arab fold with a mix of engagement and strict benchmarks. Looking beyond the region, King Abdullah committed his support to Afghanistan, where Jordan plans to deploy forces in 2009. End Summary.

Progress On Peace Negotiations Must Be A Priority

¶2. (C) King Abdullah encouraged the incoming Obama administration to immediately focus on peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Territories. He said upcoming elections in Israel were very important and expressed hope Israeli voters would select the candidate who places the conflict at the top of his agenda. It would be detrimental if the negotiations launched at Annapolis slid backwards to a "peace process" without focused U.S. engagement. He added the Palestinian issue is the rallying cry used by Iran in the region, with Hamas advancing Iranian influence. Iran was like an "octopus with tentacles," but resolving Palestinian grievances would take away a tentacle from Iran. He reasserted that Jordan supports negotiations and would continue to host the training of Palestinian security forces at the Jordan International Police Training Center (JIPTC) that began in January 2008 and will continue in 2009.

Signs Of Progress In Iraq

¶3. (C) Turning to Iraq, the King reported progress this year, with Prime Minister Maliki showing signs of being a national rather than a parochial leader. With the Iraqi Army's operations in Basrah and Sadr City, Maliki had demonstrated a willingness to confront Iranian-backed militias and special groups, although tensions between the GOI and the Kurds had the potential to reverse recent progress. He called for other Arab states, in particular Saudi Arabia, to reach out

to Maliki to keep him in the Arab fold. Regarding the 16-month timetable for withdrawal proposed by President-elect Obama during the campaign, the King commented it would "be good for the U.S. to leave, but in a way that makes sense" and avoids a security vacuum upon the Coalition's departure.

¶4. (C) Asked by Senator Dorgan whether Iraqis living in Jordan since 2003 are returning home, the King responded that only a trickle had returned. He also noted that fewer Iraqis are leaving Jordan than are leaving Syria. Sunni Iraqis no longer have homes to return to and the situation in Iraq is still tenuous, he said. These facts, combined with his decision to grant Iraqis access to Jordanian education and health programs, meant that many Iraqis were likely to remain in Jordan. The King summed up the situation this way: "I think we're stuck."

¶5. (C) Responding to Senator Cochran's inquiry about further training of Iraqi police forces at JIPTC if funding were available, the King said he supported such training in principle, but that he had not been pleased with the 2003-2007 training program because it focused on quantity over quality. The curriculum would need to be reexamined, he added.

Iran: Smart Engagement Is Essential

¶6. (C) Responding to Senator Conrad's query on how best to address Iran, King Abdullah again described it as an "octopus" that used the nuclear issue, Hizballah, Hamas, and Syria as its tentacles. The King further advised that war

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with Iran would be "disastrous" because the outcome would be uncertain. Iran could be countered, however, by addressing each of the relevant issues in ways that would deprive Iran of its "tentacles." Stabilizing Iraq would also counter Iranian influence. Senator Whitehouse asked the King if he advocated engaging Iran or working against its interests without engagement. The King replied that the U.S. should do both concurrently but that engagement needs to be done "smartly" by setting benchmarks for behavior. The U.S. transition and Israeli elections, he added, presented an "opportunity for mischief" on the part of Iran and its allies.

Syria: Dialogue Is Better Than Conflict

¶7. (C) On Syria, the King recommended that the new U.S. administration also set benchmarks for President Bashar Al Asad. The Syrians, the King explained, were masters of dragging out empty discussions to their own benefit. Additionally, Asad already thought he had "won" because of decreased international pressure and was enamored of the idea that the incoming Obama administration would need to engage him. Despite this, it was better, according to the King, to enter into dialogue with Syria than conflict. Asad remained in charge but was still consolidating his control over Syria; there was still an old guard close to him, advocating for closer ties to Iran.

Mutual Interests, Mutual Support

¶8. (C) The King thanked CODEL Dorgan for U.S. assistance to Jordan and affirmed the importance of working together on a strategic vision for the region. He pledged support for the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, where Jordan plans to deploy a special operations battalion in 2009 in addition to the current field hospital deployed in Zabul Province.

¶9. (U) CODEL Dorgan was comprised of Senators Byron Dorgan (D-ND) and Kent Conrad (D-ND); Thad Cochran (R-MS); and

Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI). They were accompanied by the Ambassador and Poloff (notetaker). King Abdullah was joined by Royal Court Chief Nasser Al-Lozi, and advisors Ayman Safadi and Jafer Hassan.

¶10. (U) CODEL Dorgan did not clear this message.

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